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## Original Article

# How hierarchic was the historical East Asian system?

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**Abstract** Hierarchy is becoming a central topic in recent International Relations scholarship, and the historical East Asian hierarchy offers an important case study. This article provides a first-cut analysis of the degree variation in regional hierarchy. It distinguishes three levels of Chinese hierarchy in China's relationships with Korea, Japan and the Mongols in 'early modern' East Asia (1368–1800). Regional relations during this period were on the whole more hierarchic than anarchic, but anarchy was also impressive in each of the relationships during certain periods. Theoretically, the analysis suggests questioning the diametrical assumption of hierarchy/anarchy as the organizing principle of international politics. For policy, it notes why a new Chinese hierarchy is unlikely to appear in the foreseeable future.

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Hierarchy and authority are emerging as central topics in recent International Relations (IR) scholarship (Wendt and Friedheim, 1995; Hurd, 1999, 2007; Ikenberry, 2001; Dunne, 2003; Hobson and Sharman, 2005; Donnelly, 2006; Goh, 2007/08, 2008; Keene, 2007; Lake, 2007, 2009a, b, 2010; Clark, 2009, 2011; Sharman, 2013). The new scholarship has enabled us, observes Jason Sharman, to 'shift from debates about whether hierarchy exists, to how it is structured and what effects it can have' (Sharman, 2013, p. 191). One of the most notable international hierarchies in world history was the historical East Asian hierarchy centered on imperial China. David Kang is the pioneering scholar in exploring China's 'status hierarchy' reflected by the 'tribute system' of regional relations (2003, 2007; 2010a, b, c). Other scholars suggest 'hierarchy under anarchy' as a structural expression of the historical East Asian system (Alagappa, 1998; Wang, 2010).

Hierarchy and authority are, however, matters of degree. Kang's characterization of East Asian hierarchy is certainly valid at a general level, and it sheds considerable

light on the distinctiveness of historical East Asian international relations. But he does not establish the degree of regional hierarchy. How complete was imperial Chinese hierarchy in East Asian history? Was historical East Asian politics not anarchic at all, thus rendering modern IR theory based on the fundamental assumption of anarchy irrelevant? One step further in the study of East Asian hierarchy, it seems, is to establish the degree of Chinese hierarchy in regional relations. This article provides a first-cut analysis of the degree variation in the historical East Asian hierarchy. Conceptually, seeing international hierarchy as degree variations in relational authority, it distinguishes three possible levels of Chinese hierarchy in East Asian history. Empirically, focusing on three relationships between China and its neighbors that represented the full spectrum of China's foreign relations in the 'early modern' period, it examines which level(s) best captured hierarchic politics in regional relations.

It will become clear that if we define hierarchy in terms of relational authority, which is the mainstream view, then the question of Chinese hierarchy becomes one of whether China possessed authority or legitimacy over its neighbors. And the empirical indicator of Chinese hierarchy becomes *other polities'* acceptance of Chinese authority rather than China's own sinocentrism. In studying international hierarchy, the crucial question inevitably turns on the subordinate actors (see also Sharman, 2013, pp. 192, 204). My case studies consequently examine the policy responses of Korean, Japanese and Mongol rulers to Chinese primacy during China's Ming and early-mid Qing dynasties (1368–1800). This was a crucial period for the hierarchy argument because it was during this period that the tribute system reached its efflorescence and Chinese power achieved its historical height with the consolidation of the vast Qing empire in the eighteenth century.

The finding confirms the hierarchic character of regional relations identified by Kang. At the same time, however, it qualifies Kang's somewhat general argument by exposing an anarchic dimension too. Hierarchy and anarchy both characterized regional relations. Sino-Korean and Sino-Japanese relationships (and to a lesser extent the Sino-Mongol relationship as well) displayed both features at different times. The degree of hierarchy of the same relationship varied, sometimes considerably, in different periods. It also varied across the three different relationships. The case studies suggest that historical East Asian politics during the period under discussion was on the whole more hierarchic than anarchic. Hierarchy was certainly the dominant organizing principle of regional relations within the Sinitic zone most heavily influenced by Chinese culture (principally China, Korea, Vietnam and Japan). Anarchy appeared more impressive in regional relations beyond the Chinese cultural sphere, such as in the Sino-Mongol relationship: Culture was thus an important condition affecting the degree of regional hierarchy.

In addition to advancing existing research on historical East Asian hierarchy, the article also derives two theoretical implications. First, as organizing principles of international politics, hierarchy and anarchy should not be seen as dichotomous or mutually exclusive categories. Nor is it necessary to subsume one under the other,



as in the ‘hierarchy amidst anarchy’ (Weber, 2000), ‘hierarchy under anarchy’ (cf. Donnelly, 2006) or ‘hierarchy in anarchy’ (Clark, 2011, p. 33) argument. Second, believing that hierarchy and anarchy can coexist in different degrees within a single international system, scholars have recently argued that seeing them as a continuum or matter of degree will have great analytical payoff (Hobson and Sharman, 2005; Thompson, 2006, p. 7; Wohlforth, 2008, p. 45; Lake, 2009b, pp. 264, 265). My analysis supports this view, and it contributes to the larger debate on hierarchy in international relations by demonstrating the degree variation in East Asian hierarchy.

But I must also add the caveat that this is a first-cut qualitative analysis of regional hierarchy. A more precise delineation of the degrees of hierarchy in historical East Asian international relations will need further research, perhaps with the aid of quantitative techniques. Nor does the article explain the variations in regional hierarchy it identifies. That would demand a very different sort of study with a causal research design on how the social structure of regional politics (including the organizing principle of hierarchy) was shaped by agential actions. In this sense, this article establishes a dependent variable – degree variations in regional hierarchy – while leaving the independent variables and a consequent causal analysis aside. Even so, establishing the fact that the degree of Chinese hierarchy varied in regional politics is a step forward in providing some specificity to our still quite general understanding of international relations in East Asian history.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section, drawing on theories of relational authority and the literature on the tribute system, develops a theoretical framework about three levels of Chinese hierarchy in East Asian history. The second section then explains the research design, focusing on case selection and the methodological criteria for differentiating among the three levels of Chinese hierarchy in empirical research. Three main empirical sections follow to examine levels of Chinese hierarchy over Korea, Japan and the Mongols by analyzing their policy responses toward China. The conclusion summarizes the theoretical implications and questions the possibility of a new Chinese hierarchy in East Asia. The possibility is very low, at least from the vantage point of the present. Chinese authority in the contemporary world is fundamentally inhibited by the civilizational and political deficits of the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

### Three Levels of Chinese Hierarchy

Hierarchy in IR theory is sometimes conceptualized in terms of the unequal distribution of material capabilities, especially in the power transition research program (Organski, 1958; Organski and Kugler, 1980; DiCicco and Levy, 2003). This conception is not particularly useful, because capability alone tells us nothing about the ‘deep structure’ or ‘ordering principle’ of international politics (Ruggie, 1998, pp. 141, 152). A more useful conception of hierarchy, which is also the conventional one, is to see it as a relationship or structure of authority. This is implicit

in Waltz's early formulation that in a hierarchic system, units 'stand in relation of super – and subordination. Some are entitled to command; others are required to obey' (1979, p. 88). Milner (1991) has shown that to neorealists, anarchy means the lack of authority or legitimacy and hierarchy the existence of them. More recently, Lake has defined hierarchy explicitly in terms of political authority. 'A political relationship is anarchic if the units – in this case, states – possess no authority over one another. It is hierarchic when one unit, the dominant state, possesses authority over a second, subordinate state' (Lake, 2007, p. 50; see also Lake, 2009a).

This focus of hierarchy on relational authority can be traced back to the tradition of Max Weber and highlights the crucial role of legitimacy in international politics. According to Weber, authority is the condition in which power is married to legitimacy. Peter Blau, writing on Weber's theory of authority, explains:

Resort to either positive incentives or coercive measures by a person in order to influence others is *prima facie* evidence that he does not have authority over them ... . We speak of authority, therefore, if the willing unconditional compliance of a group of people rests upon their shared beliefs that it is legitimate for the superior (person or impersonal agency) to impose his will upon them and that it is illegitimate for them to refuse obedience. (1963, p. 307)

In the context of domestic politics, governments that are legitimate 'have the "right to rule", to demand obedience from their citizens or subjects' (Flathman, 1995, p. 527). Political legitimacy can be defined 'as the quality of "oughtness" that is perceived by the public to inhere in a political regime' (Merelman, 1966, p. 548). It 'refers to the normative belief by an actor that a rule or institution ought to be obeyed' (Hurd, 1999, p. 381). Interstate hierarchy can then be seen as a relationship in which one state's rule over another state is accepted as legitimate by the latter state. Hierarchy is not so much a matter of material capabilities as it is of one state's perceptions or beliefs about another state's role and behavior. It is a normative or ideational phenomenon.

Hierarchy also needs to be understood 'as a continuum on which one actor has more or less political authority over other actors ... . Authority is not a constant but a variable that exists in greater or lesser degrees in different times and places, thus creating variations in hierarchy' (Lake, 2009b, pp. 264–265). In other words, hierarchy manifests itself in the degrees or levels of authority an actor possesses over another actor. In behavioral terms, interstate hierarchy can encompass a range of behaviors from mere acceptance of the dominant power's role to active following of its command. It is therefore useful to further distinguish between different degrees of hierarchy and legitimacy. This will also be necessary for avoiding selection bias and achieving better research design (Lake, 2009b, pp. 175–176). I suggest the following three levels of Chinese hierarchy according to the nature and range of issues where imperial China may have authority over other polities.

At the most basic level, hierarchy is manifested in a rank ordering of status: 'Those at the top feel superior and have their status confirmed by high office and the



deference and subordination of those at the bottom' (Lebow, 2008, p. 106). Under a Chinese *status hierarchy*, other polities accept as legitimate China's claim to political centrality and cultural superiority in the world (see Fairbank, 1968b). They should neither put up rival claims of their own centrality and superiority nor openly challenge China's normative position. Such status hierarchy distinguishes China from its neighbors in terms of their respective roles and positions in the system. China is the central and superior power; its neighbors, the peripheral and inferior. And China's neighbors should accept such a scheme of sinocentric order as appropriate and legitimate. Apart from accepting Chinese centrality normatively and renouncing challenge to that centrality as a general policy principle, however, status hierarchy does not indicate what concrete policies other polities will adopt toward China. They may accept China's centrality while avoiding too close a contact with it, or they may actively participate in the sinocentric order.

At the second level, beyond status hierarchy other polities also accept as legitimate the 'rules of the game' of international relations laid down by China. This means essentially acceptance of the Chinese tributary scheme of foreign relations: observe prescribed rituals in relations with China, pay proper tribute to the Chinese court in the form of local products and perform other duties as China's tributary or vassal states (see Fairbank and Teng, 1941; Fairbank, 1942, 1968a). This might be called a kind of *institutional hierarchy*, embodying other polities' acceptance of the Chinese tributary rules, norms and institutions as the legitimate framework for foreign relations. An important implication of institutional hierarchy is that other polities effectively renounce their own conceptions of foreign relations and instead accept China's tribute system as the authoritative and appropriate framework for their relationships with China.

Despite the prominence of the tribute system, however, it did not encompass the whole gamut of historical East Asian politics. In fact, the tribute system paradigm in the historical literature describes only the tributary part of the relationships between China and its neighbors and thus gives only a partial picture of the multiplicity of historical East Asian politics (Zhang, 2009). It is essential to recognize that China and its neighbors also employed other diplomatic and strategic approaches toward each other outside the tribute system framework. Moreover, the significance of the tribute system in regional relations also varied historically. In some periods, such as the Song (960–1279) when China was divided and weak, it may not be consequential at all.

For these reasons, it is useful to suggest a kind of *rule hierarchy* in historical East Asian politics: China is entitled to rule, and other polities are required to obey, not just in their tributary relationships, but also in other diplomatic and strategic interactions. This is the third and deepest level of Chinese hierarchy, in which other polities not only accept China's status as the central and superior power and conduct voluntary tributary relations, but also willingly obey its commands outside the institution of the tribute system. So conceived, rule hierarchy approaches the ideal of domestic politics, and one may expect it to be rare in the realm of international

politics. Indeed, genuine instances of rule hierarchy were hard to find in East Asian history, only occasionally manifested in the relationships between China and its closest neighbors within the Sinitic zone.

It is necessary to distinguish among these three levels of Chinese hierarchy because each level, from status, institutional, to rule, implies additional empirical content. Institutional hierarchy differs from status hierarchy because while a status hierarchy implies only other polities' acceptance of China's centrality, an institutional hierarchy also indicates how they will carry out their relations with China in such an order. Likewise, while an institutional hierarchy indicates the acceptance of the tribute system as the only legitimate framework for conducting relations with China, a rule hierarchy also implies other polities' compliance with Chinese commands beyond tributary norms and practices. Chinese hierarchy and authority in the system thus become more complete along a structural continuum from status, institutional, to rule hierarchy.

## Research Design

The case studies below examine the social structure of the historical East Asian system by analyzing the policies of Korea, Japan and the Mongols toward China's Ming (1368–1644) and early-mid Qing dynasties (1644–1911) between 1368 and 1800. In addition to China, Korea, Japan and the Mongol tribes, Vietnam and some other Southeast Asian polities were also actors within the East Asian international system during this period. I focus on the dyadic relationships between China and Korea, Japan, and the Mongols because they are already sufficient to represent the full spectrum of regional relations. They embody a complete range of China's foreign relationships from the most cooperative (Korea) to the most confrontational (the Mongols) with a difficult case in between (Japan). The inclusion of other cases, such as Vietnam, which has been ably analyzed recently (Kelley, 2005; Womack, 2006; Vuving, 2009), does not seem to offer additional methodological payoff.

This 'early modern' period should also be seen as possibly the best period to examine Chinese hierarchy in East Asian history. It was the last phase and also the institutional apogee of the tribute system in Chinese history. The early Ming inherited a complex legacy of imperial Chinese foreign relations and institutionalized them into a bureaucratic system for the first time in Chinese history – the tribute system as we now call it (Fairbank and Teng, 1941, p. 137; Mancall, 1984, p. 13; Wills, 1984, p. 14; Li, 2004, pp. 14, 61). Although the early Qing lagged behind the Ming in terms of the number of tributary states, it made an important institutional innovation in establishing the *Lifanyuan* (the Bureau of Frontier Affairs) for Inner Asian relations (Chia, 1993). And the Qing was an expansive empire incorporating into its domain vast stretches of territories (Manchuria, Mongolia, Xinjiang and Tibet), which had hitherto remained out of reach for Han Chinese dynasties.



The following empirical analysis aims to determine what levels of hierarchy China had possessed over Korea, Japan and the Mongols. The ‘markers’ of each level of hierarchy need to be identified in order to provide necessary methodological criteria for empirical judgment. For a status hierarchy, secondary states only need to acknowledge China’s centrality by, for example, accepting the rescripts sent from the Chinese emperor or sending intermittent tribute missions to China to indicate their general acceptance of sinocentrism, without performing the full duties of being a tributary state. For an institutional hierarchy, secondary states must also comply with the tribute system as the sole institutional framework for their relationships with China. For a rule hierarchy, in addition to being loyal tributary states, they must also follow China’s demands outside the normal tribute system framework. These are the core expectations of each level of Chinese hierarchy on which the historical evidence can be brought to bear. For instance, in the case of tributary trade, which Korea, Japan and the Mongols all eagerly sought from China, the major criterion for determining the level of Chinese hierarchy is not the mere fact of conducting tributary trade, but whether in doing so they were acknowledging China’s centrality (status hierarchy), complying with the tribute system (institutional hierarchy), or merely taking advantage of China’s desire to receive foreign missions for their own self-interests without accepting Chinese centrality (no hierarchy).

### **China’s Status and Institutional Hierarchy over Korea**

By the time of the founding of the Ming dynasty in 1368, the Koryŏ dynasty (918–1392) in Korea had grudgingly accepted the hegemony of the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) for nearly a century, enforced upon them by Mongol military coercion. In 1369, shortly after the new Ming envoys came to inform the Koryŏ court of the founding of their new regime, King Kongmin decided to sever official relations with the Yuan, which had now been expelled by the Ming army into exile in the Mongolian steppe, and to establish tributary relations with the Ming. The Ming reign title and calendar were adopted, and the relationship began to be described in Confucian familial terms as one between a superior China and an inferior Korea (Larson, 2008, p. 31). In the next 3 years, the relationship was cordial, as the Koryŏ followed Ming requests and sent appropriate tributary missions (Clark, 1978, p. 44; LCSL, p. 14). At this stage, the Ming–Koryŏ relationship approached the ideal of an institutional hierarchy. In 1370–1371, however, Korea launched a campaign into the Liaodong area on the Sino-Korean frontier, which was then controlled by the Mongols. As the result of a series of further disputes, the Hongwu emperor of the Ming had come to regard Korea as a real security threat by the 1380s (Clark, 1978, p. 163; Langlois, 1988, p. 166).

The Koryŏ court was not always loyal to the Ming. Although King Kongmin generally followed a ‘pro-Ming, anti-Yuan’ policy, he maintained contacts with the

Mongols in Liaodong and the Yuan court in exile, both the Ming's enemies (LCSL, pp. 13, 15; Huang, 1994, p. 207). His successor, King U, explicitly adopted what might be called a 'two-China policy' in the pursuit of an uneasy neutrality between Chinese and Mongol power centers in Liaodong. The difficulty of gaining the Ming's favor forced U's government to adopt a more conciliatory policy toward the Mongols in order to keep Korea secure. It even received investiture from the Northern Yuan and adopted its reign-title in 1376 (Clark, 1978, pp. 68–70). The Koryŏ's relationship with the Ming eventually collapsed in 1388 when the court decided to wage an expeditionary campaign into Liaodong as a response to the Ming's territorial claim. This triggered General Yi Sŏng-gye's *coup d'état* and led to the establishment of the Chosŏn dynasty in 1392. Sino-Korean relations in 1372–1388, then, reflected mostly a Chinese status hierarchy. The Koreans accepted sino-centrism for the most part, but frequently ignored the rules and demands of the Ming tribute system as laid down by the Hongwu emperor, and sought to challenge the Ming in 1388. The relationship was generally hierarchic, but anarchy was also impressive on several occasions when the interests between the two sides clashed.

The Chosŏn dynasty, after its founding in 1392, took a very accommodationist approach toward Ming China, basing its policy on the principle of *sadae* (serve the great) (Lee, 1984, p. 189; Clark, 1998, p. 276). The Ming–Chosŏn relationship resembled a model institutional hierarchy, but not a rule hierarchy. The Koreans complied with the tribute system in their formal relationship with the Ming, but were suspicious of and even competitive toward the Ming when it came to certain practical policy issues. The element of competition was best demonstrated by the Jurchen problem. The Jurchens were a tribal people living in China's northeast region adjoining Korea. Both Ming China and Chosŏn Korea wanted to control them for security on their borders. The thrust of Korean policy was to eschew Chinese pressure and entice the Jurchens to settle along the Korean border, so as to create a defense network in the north. In effect, the Koreans were trying to establish their own version of a 'tribute system' toward the Jurchens. But such a policy would necessarily create tension with the Ming. Indeed, during the Yongle reign (1403–1424), when the Ming emperor was determined to undermine Korean influence and to bring the Jurchens firmly under Ming control, the Koreans mounted a serious challenge to Chinese encroachment on what was believed to be Korea's 'sphere of influence'. Korean envoys even went to the Ming capital to ask the emperor to leave Jurchen chieftains alone (see Serruys, 1955; Rossabi, 1975).

Facing less pressure from the Ming after the Yongle reign, Korean attempts to bring the Jurchens under their orbit continued apace. Both King Sejong (1418–1450) and King Sejo (1455–1468) hoped to re-conquer the northeast and were enthusiastic supporters of a Korean 'tribute system' in that region. During the decade of the restoration campaign under King Sejong beginning in 1434, Korean armies attacked across the Yalu and Tumen rivers on numerous occasions (Walker, 1971, p. 288). King Sejo actively encouraged the Jianzhou Jurchens and their chieftains, who were



nominally under Ming command, to pay tribute to the Korean court. In 1457, King Sejo told his court that both the Jurchens and the Japanese should be regarded as Korea's vassals; Korea itself was a political center for other polities (except China) to pay appropriate homage (Huang, 1995, pp. 32–34). The Koreans still believed in sinocentrism, but by developing a sort of 'Korea-centrism' as an extension, they twisted the original Chinese vision.

After the Imjin War in which the Ming army helped Korea to repel the Japanese invasion (Hawley, 2005; Swope, 2009), Korea's relations with the Ming were determined by the debt that the Koreans felt they owed for Chinese assistance. They were also greatly complicated by the rise of Manchu power on Korea's northern border (Clark, 1998, p. 299). The Korean court was divided into several political factions, and foreign policy became a key factor in factional struggle. King Kwanghae (1608–1623) had to choose between loyalty to a declining Ming or to a threatening 'barbarian' neighbor. He eventually broke away from Korea's *sadae* tradition and opted for an uneasy dual-track strategy by fulfilling obligations toward the Ming at a minimum level while avoiding offending the Manchus (see Wang, 2008). Such a strategy, however, was domestically unpopular. King Kwanghae was deposed and succeeded by King Injo (1623–1649), who abandoned Kwanghae's posture of watchful waiting in favor of a blatant pro-Ming, anti-Manchu policy (Lee, 1984, p. 215).

King Injo's adamant anti-Manchu stance triggered two Manchu invasions of Korea in 1627 and 1636, and the Koreans were forced to switch their allegiance from the Ming to the Qing. But Korea's relations with the Qing before the late eighteenth century were of a qualitatively different kind from its relations with the Ming. While the Koreans accepted the centrality and superiority of Ming China, they never wholeheartedly accepted Manchu superiority until after the eighteenth century. Korean sinocentrism at the turn of the Ming-Qing transition held that the Jurchens/Manchus, regarded as the *yi* (culturally inferior foreign peoples), were culturally inferior to the Koreans. And as the Ming had collapsed, it was Korea, now the last bastion of civilization, not the Qing, that should assume the position of the center of the world. Thus, while in terms of material power the Koreans were well aware of their inferiority and hence performed all the tributary rituals toward the Qing, they were unwilling to accept the Manchus as the *hua* (culturally Chinese) (Sun, 2008). Their antipathy to the Manchus was amply demonstrated by the Chosŏn court's continuing gratitude toward the defunct Ming dynasty and its frequent illusion of hoping to help restore it. There were, of course, realistic officials who wished to take the Manchu side, but they were a minority before the eighteenth century. The Koreans' overall anti-Manchu sentiments suggested, somewhat counter-intuitively, that while the Sino-Korean relationship during the early-mid Qing was relatively trouble-free, it was not a truly hierarchical relationship if hierarchy is defined in terms of the Manchu Qing's legitimate authority over the Chosŏn court. The Chosŏn court actually rejected a Qing-centered order, regarded themselves as the *hua* and secretly hoped to help restore the Ming – the real *hua* in their minds (see Sun, 2007).

The Manchu investiture of Korean kings began in 1637, when King Injo was granted the title 'King of Korea'. But such investiture, along with the tributary rituals that went with it, was now regarded as only a necessary formality compelled by Manchu power. The Koreans detested Manchu subjugation, and their hatred grew with the Manchu conquest of whole China after 1644. The Manchus, on the other hand, changed their approach toward the Koreans once they had consolidated power in China. Intimidation and war gave way to quiet persuasion and inducement. But the Koreans were unmoved. An implicit policy objective, shared by several Korean kings in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was to 'overthrow the Qing and restore the Ming'. They sought to do so at different times by trying to liaison with Ming loyalists in south China, the Zheng family that had established a fortress in Taiwan and even the Japanese in Satsuma.

The Kangxi reign (1662–1723) was an era of restoration, consolidation and development in China, but the many Korean envoys to Beijing, whose mission was partly to collect intelligence about the Qing state, reached the opposite conclusion – that the Qing was in decline. During the War of the Three Feudatories (1673–1681), many Koreans believed with excitement that Qing collapse was imminent, and even suggested Korean military intervention. After the three feudatories were pacified, they began to place hope on the Zheng house in Taiwan, and the court was willing to offer them and their possible collaborating Japanese forces the right to use Korean ports for military action against the Qing. Korea's most consistent anti-Manchu act, however, was the construction of secret shrines where they could mourn the Ming emperors. Indeed, there existed 'an official Ming cult' in the Confucian ruling class (Ledyard, 1983, p. 330). The court continued to use the Ming calendar and adopt the Ming imperial garb. King Yǒngjo (1724–1776), lamenting the Ming's collapse in as late as 1763, even refused to use the Qing reign title. In the eyes of many Koreans at the time, the Qing was a 'big power' but not a 'heavenly dynasty' like the Ming, and they derogatorily referred to the Qing emperor as 'barbarian emperor' (*hu huang*). All of these anti-Manchu acts, however, were taking place while the court also maintained tributary formalities with the Qing, thus creating a real oddity in the history of East Asian international relations.

In sum, Ming China's relationship with the Koryŏ dynasty was initially characterized by an institutional hierarchy but subsequently reduced to a status hierarchy. The Koryŏ court acknowledged a sinocentric world order but at the same time violated or ignored the Ming's injunctions about tributary missions and even challenged it on a few occasions. Ming China's relationship with the Chosŏn dynasty approached an ideal institutional hierarchy. But the suspicion and competition in the relationship outside the tribute system indicated the lack of a rule hierarchy. The early Qing, however, even failed to establish a status hierarchy over the Koreans, because the Chosŏn court simply rejected the validity of a sinocentric order centered on the Manchus. To be sure, it sent tributary missions to the Manchu court in an almost impeccable manner. Rather than being based on a perception of Manchu authority, however, it was largely compelled by the Manchus' hard power.



## China's Loss of Hierarchy Over Japan

When the Hongwu emperor sought to establish tributary relations with Japan after 1368, Japan was in the middle of a 60-year civil war between two imperial houses, the Northern Court at Kyoto buttressed by the newly established Muromachi bakufu (1338–1573), and the Southern Court at Yoshino supported by regional barons. The emperor's March-1369 rescript, preoccupied with the Wako (Japanese pirates) problem, threatened Japan with invasion if the Japanese did not solve the problem (MSL, Taizu shi lu: 39.787). The Chinese envoys arrived at Dazaifu in northern Kyushu and handed in the rescript to Prince Kanenaga, the Southern Court's general in western Japan, mistaking him as 'king of Japan' (Cheng, 1981, pp. 151–152). Kanenaga was greatly annoyed at the tone of the rescript, and he imprisoned and executed the envoys (Wang, 1953, p. 11; Takeo and Sakai, 1977, p. 163; Cheng, 1981, p. 152).

When another Chinese mission came in 1370, however, Kanenaga changed his attitude and sent a return mission a year later. But in 1372 he changed his position again, and detained Chinese envoys for 1 year in Kyushu. This was most probably because he wanted to prevent contact between China and the Northern Court. At the time he was under heavy military pressure from the Northern Court (Sansom, 1961, pp. 109–113; Hall, 1990, p. 206), and might have wanted to monopolize Japan's relations with Ming China in his struggle against the Ashikaga. Kanenaga sent another mission to the Ming court in 1376 to apologize for frequent Wako raids along China's coast (MS, p. 8343). But the Hongwu emperor regarded this mission as 'lacking integrity' and issued a stern warning. This must have angered Kanenaga, as he ceased to send missions for 3 years (Sansom, 1961, p. 168). Then he sent three missions to the Ming court in 1379, 1380 and 1381, respectively (MS, p. 8342). But the emperor was greatly annoyed by the failure of these missions to observe Ming tributary rules. After rejecting the 1381 mission, he ordered the Ministry of Rites to draft a letter of strong reprimand for Kanenaga with an explicit threat of war (MSL, Taizu shi lu: 138.2174; Wang, 1953, p. 18). Kanenaga, however, replied with an extraordinarily provocative letter no later than 1382. It announced, among other things, that 'the world is the world's world; it does not belong to a single person' (MS, p. 8343), thus challenging the very notion of a sinocentric world order. At this stage, Ming China failed to establish even a status hierarchy over Japan.

In 1400 Ashikaga Yoshimitsu emerged as the single ruler of Japan, having ended the civil war and crushed his rivals. Now he was in firm control of Japanese politics and ready to assume responsibility of foreign policy. From 1401 when he sent a mission to the court of the Jianwen emperor to his death in 1408, Yoshimitsu showed exceptional deference to China. His most dramatic act was the 1403 memorial to the Yongle emperor, which opened with the declaration: 'Your vassal, the King of Japan, memorializes' (Cheng, 1981, pp. 250–251). It was the first document in which a Japanese shogun had called himself a 'vassal' of the Chinese emperor. Yoshimitsu

kept his words of obedience very well. In the 8 years between 1401 and 1408, he sent at least eight missions to the Ming, all of which were well received. Moreover, in 1405 he sent a mission with 20 captured Japanese pirates (MS, p. 8345), thus becoming the first Japanese ruler, perhaps the only one in a substantial way, to have met the Chinese request of suppressing the Wako. During this period Ming China seemed to have had an institutional and even rule hierarchy over Japan.

But Japanese policy took a dramatic turn when the new shogun Yoshimochi terminated the tributary relationship in 1411 and refused to reopen it in a letter to the Yongle emperor, which challenged Chinese superiority by evoking Japanese divinity and national myth (Wang, 1953, pp. 49–53). Tributary relations were restored once again in 1433. The Japanese wanted to profit from trade with China while the Ming wanted to end Japanese piracy along China's coast. Between 1433 and 1547, Japan sent 11 missions to China. Although the 1523 mission erupted into open clashes between the Chinese and Japanese traders, Sino-Japanese relations were relatively stable. The Ming court allowed the Japanese to come once in 10 years but was no longer enthusiastic about sending its own missions to Japan. The Japanese, now predominantly motivated by profit from trade for domestic political purposes, sent regular missions but did not have a major interest in being too close to the Ming. What they wanted was primarily a commercial rather than a political relationship. The Sino-Japanese relationship during this period may be seen as an institutional hierarchy. After the 1540s, however, as rival daimyo struggled for power as the result of the collapse of the Ashikaga hegemony, as the Wako problem became too dangerous for official trading missions, and perhaps also because the Ming regulation of trade proved too restrictive for the Japanese, Sino-Japanese tributary trade came to an end, not just during the Ming, but for ever (Zhang and Guo, 2006, pp. 318–330).

Hideyoshi's invasion of Korea in 1592 and the following Imjin War was a precursor to the troubled Sino-Japanese relationship in modern times. During 1600–1610, the early years of the Tokugawa bakufu, Japan still hoped to restore relations with China through Korean mediation. Having been excluded from contacts with China for over half a century, the bakufu was intent on obtaining right to trade directly with China, a right suspended since 1547. But the most important reason for the bakufu's desire to restore relations with Korea and China was the need for legitimacy in a new domestic order that it was constructing (Toby, 1977, 1984). Yet the Japanese were now unwilling to acknowledge Chinese superiority in the way of Yoshimitsu two centuries ago. Their unwillingness went well beyond Kanenaga's and Yoshimochi's. The Chinese emperor was now called the 'Son of Heaven of Great Ming', a language intended to reserve Japan's own 'Son of Heaven in Kyoto' and deny the universality of the Chinese monarchy (Toby, 1977, pp. 332–333). Moreover, as the bakufu gradually consolidated its rule in Japan, its interest in entering the Chinese world order waned. From the 1620s, the bakufu no longer felt the need to compromise a burgeoning autonomous structure of legitimacy for the marginal advantage of direct dealings with the Ming.



Moreover, Japanese officials rejected the use of Chinese era names in diplomatic correspondence (and asked Korea to do the same), removing any remaining vestige of their subordination to China. They further wanted to establish an alternative international order alongside the sinocentric one, a 'Great Prince' order centered on Japan (Toby, 1977, p. 352). Knowing China would not accede to such an egregious Japanese design, the bakufu simply rejected official relations with China, only allowing Chinese ships to trade privately in Nagasaki. After 1644, when the Qing dynasty was established, China disappeared from Japanese foreign relations altogether. In fact, the bakufu demoted China to the lowest rung of its hierarchy of partners, placing it not only below Korea and Ryukyu, with which it had official relations, but also below Holland, with which it had no formal relations but permitted its representatives to come to Edo and present greetings to the shogun (Toby, 1984, p. 196; see also Batten, 2003; Jansen, 1992). After the 1710s, China was effectively dealt with as 'barbarians' by the Japanese (Toby, 1984, pp. 197–198).

It was clear that the Japanese during the Ming and Qing periods had moved farther and farther away from a sinocentric conception of world order, culminating in the extreme anti-Chinese views of the nativists in the Edo period (Pollack, 1986, p. 12). Indeed, by that time 'Japan had not only rejected subordination to China, but had claimed parity with China, even superiority over China' (Toby, 1984, p. 227). The Sino-Japanese relationship thus became less and less hierarchic. China was almost able to establish a rule hierarchy over Yoshimitsu, producing a major exception in the history of Japanese foreign relations. It also maintained a loose institutional hierarchy over Ashikaga rulers for a good part of Ashikaga rule in Japan. But after the fall of the Ashikaga shogunate in 1573, this hierarchy was gradually and completely lost.

### **Between Anarchy and Hierarchy: Sino-Mongol Relations**

The Mongols, whose Yuan dynasty ruled China for 90 years, were driven back to the steppe by the Ming army and divided into several tribes competing for power and hegemony in the steppe. Sino-Mongol relations during the Hongwu reign (1368–1398) of the Ming were characterized by gradual Chinese advance into the steppe, and Mongol retreat and resistance against Chinese encroachment. The Hongwu emperor, as well as the Yongle emperor after him, aimed to establish Chinese superiority over the Mongols by both offensive warfare and diplomacy (cf. Johnston, 1995). During the Yongle reign, steppe politics were characterized by a shifting balance of power and competition for hegemony between the Eastern Mongols and the Oirats (the Western Mongols). Both tribes sent intermittent tribute missions to the Ming in order to obtain Chinese goods and wealth for military buildup against the other, but were suppressed by the Ming when they appeared to challenge its superiority (see Langlois, 1988; Chan, 1988).

The alternation of Eastern Mongol and Oirat powers in the steppe continued after the Yongle reign. The Yongle emperor's last three campaigns of 1422–1424 had weakened the Eastern Mongols, and as a result the Oirats again became more powerful. In the 1430s the new Oirat leader Esen became the single Mongol hegemon in almost 50 years since the destruction of Mongol unity by the Ming army in 1388. Although by this time Esen had secured his rear, he was still using tributary missions to build up his economic resources and apparently had no plan for a major attack on the Ming. But perhaps as the result of his expansion, he was in need of much greater resources and became more defiant of the Ming. In the 1440s he expanded the number of envoys to the Ming over 2000, and to 3000 in 1448, despite Chinese complaints about the great cost of feeding such huge numbers. When the Ming refused to pay as much as requested, Esen attacked and inflicted a humiliating defeat on the Ming army in a place called Tumu in 1449, capturing the Ming emperor who was personally leading the expedition (Waldron, 1990, p. 87; Perdue, 2005, pp. 57–58).

The Tumu debacle put the Ming permanently on the defensive against the Mongols (Waldron, 1990, p. 91). Esen, for a brief period, became hegemon of the steppe, but was killed in 1455 by the Eastern Mongols. As the Mongols prosecuted their civil wars, they made frequent demands for trade with the Ming in order to build up their economic bases (Waldron, 1990, pp. 93–94; Perdue, 2005, pp. 59–61). For over 20 years from the 1460s, power and succession struggles destabilized the Mongol world, until in 1483 Batu Möngke reunified the Mongols and proclaimed himself the Dayan Khan. Between 1508 and 1510 Batu conquered the strategically important Ordos region inside the Yellow River bend, thus posing a direct threat to the Ming's northern defense. He continued the pattern of attacking the Ming in order to obtain Chinese goods after the Ming rejected his request for tributary trade (Waldron, 1990, pp. 110–111).

After the 1540s, the Mongols were under the leadership of Altan Khan (1507–1582), the most effective Mongol leader since the fall of the Yuan. Like many earlier Mongol leaders, initially Altan Khan also tried to obtain resources to reconstruct a steppe confederation through tributary trade with China. In the 1540s he repeatedly sent envoys to request trade, persisting even after several of them had been killed by the Chinese (Serruys, 1967, p. 35). The requests stirred up extensive debate in the Ming court. But when they were refused, the khan resorted to raid, beginning a cycle of 'requests, refusal, and raid', which lasted for nearly 30 years (Waldron, 1990, pp. 122–124; Perdue, 2005, p. 64). In 1550 the khan led his forces outside Beijing, but his main purpose was still to seek permission for tributary trade. In the face of such threat, the Ming court decided to open border markets and establish tributary relations in 1551, but a stable tributary trade settlement was maintained only after 1571 (Waldron, 1990, pp. 175–177, 186).

By the early seventeenth century the Mongols had fragmented once again into independent tribes: the Southern Mongols in today's Inner Mongolia, the Eastern Mongols (Khalkha) in Outer Mongolia, which were further divided into three tribes,



and the four tribes of the Western Mongols (the Oirats) among which the Zunghars were the strongest. Before setting out to conquer China in the 1640s, the Manchus had begun to bring the neighboring Mongol tribes – the Southern and Eastern Mongols – under their influence by using dynastic marriages, religious connections, and a combination of war, threat and inducement (Di Cosmo and Bao, 2003; Perdue, 2005, pp. 122–127). Their main Mongol rival was the Zunghars in the west. First defeated by the Qing in a major campaign in 1696, the Zunghars remained a great power in Central Eurasia. In the next 50 years, Zunghar relations with the Qing alternated between open warfare and tense truces. In 1755, taking advantage of the fragmentation of the Zunghars due to civil war and natural disasters, the Qing finally conquered Zungharia and established dominance in Central Eurasia (Perdue, 2005; Millward, 2007, pp. 88–97; Beckwith, 2009, pp. 229–240).

Because Sino-Mongol relations during the Ming-Qing era were frequently marked by disagreements, conflicts and wars, the relationship was anarchic. The judgment is too simplistic, for a careful conclusion drawn from the above analysis would also need to take into account peaceful tributary trade between the Mongols and Ming China as well as the submission of the Eastern and Southern Mongols to the Manchu Qing. During the Ming, amidst continuous conflicts there was also an impressive persistence on the part of the Mongols to request permission for tributary trade. The question is whether such requests implied Mongol acknowledgement of Chinese centrality. To be sure, there was an essential difference between the motivations behind the Mongols' and the Koreans' tribute missions. If for the Koreans China's cultural excellence was a very important factor, for the Mongols it certainly was not. For the nomads the decisive factor was trade and profit (see Serruys, 1967), through which they could build up the resources necessary for sustenance, for waging inter-tribe wars, and for building their steppe confederations (see Khazanov, 1984; Barfield, 1989; Jagchid and Symons, 1989; Di Cosmo, 1994, 2002; Beckwith, 2009). When their demand for tributary trade was not met, the Mongols usually resorted to raids and plunders in order to obtain what they needed.

But the mere request for trade would suggest at least a degree of Mongol acceptance of Chinese power in the East Asian region and recognition of the usefulness of a peaceful tributary-trade relationship with China, even though the request was instrumentally oriented for self-interest. And, in several periods during the Ming tributary trade was in fact allowed, and the Mongols were more or less brought into China's tribute system. This did not characterize the relationship on the whole. But tributary trade, when it was maintained, suggested a certain degree of Ming China's status or institutional hierarchy over the Mongols depending on how closely the latter complied with the tribute system. The authority of the early-mid Qing over the Eastern and Southern Mongols was more impressive. The submission of these tribes to the Manchus was based not just on the need for trade, as with the Mongols during the Ming, but also on marital, religious and ethnic ties. On the whole, then, the Sino-Mongol relationship during the Ming period was much more anarchic than

hierarchical. During the early-mid Qing, it seemed hierarchic in the relationship between the Manchu court and the Eastern and Southern Mongols, as it was anarchic in the relationship between the Manchus and the Zunghars.

## Conclusion

How hierarchic was the historical East Asian system in the ‘early modern’ period of 1368–1800? This article has examined three representative relationships to capture degree variations in regional hierarchy. China’s relationship with Korea was initially characterized by an institutional hierarchy in 1368–1371, reduced to a status hierarchy in 1372–1392, raised again to an institutional hierarchy in 1392–1644, and brought down to no hierarchy in 1644–1800. Its relationship with Japan began with no hierarchy in 1368–1400, elevated to an almost rule hierarchy in 1401–1408, brought down to no hierarchy in 1409–1432, raised to an institutional hierarchy in 1433–1547, and finally collapsed with no hierarchy in 1548–1800. Its relationship with various Mongol tribes was marked by an alternating cycle of anarchy and hierarchy, and was much more anarchic than hierarchic during the Ming period. Thus, the degree of Chinese hierarchy in regional politics varied both within the same relationship in different periods and across the three different relationships. Each relationship displayed both hierarchic and anarchic qualities in varying degrees. One may say that regional relations were on the whole more hierarchic than anarchic, but anarchy was also impressive in each of the relationships during certain periods.

This provides a more complicated picture of regional politics than an overarching hierarchy argument would suggest, and establishes the fact that the degree variation in regional hierarchy is a dependent variable to be explained. But on the other hand, the regional system was far from a pure anarchy. It was, rather, a crisscross or mixed system with both hierarchic and anarchic politics in play. We may lack a good term to describe such a hybrid structure, but it was not unique to East Asian history (see Hobson and Sharman, 2005; Clark, 2009, 2011; Nexon, 2009; Lake, 2009a). Complementing earlier research (for example, Donnelly, 2006), this suggests questioning the diametrical view of the organizing principle of international politics as either anarchy or hierarchy as if they were categorically distinct and mutually exclusive. Instead, we should see hierarchy or anarchy as a matter of degree, and realize that elements of anarchic and hierarchic politics can coexist within the same international system and even in the same relationship over a certain period of time.

A further implication is that, if we accept that international politics always contain both hierarchic and anarchic elements, then an important task is to classify different types of international structure and to investigate empirically which type is the more dominant in given circumstances. The English School, particularly in the works of Adam Watson (1992) and Barry Buzan (2004), has contributed substantially to this task, as has Wendt’s (1999) classification of three types of



international social structure. An auxiliary implication is that if anarchic and hierarchic politics can coexist, then it is unnecessary to make the 'hierarchy under anarchy' argument. In our case of China's relations with its neighbors, hierarchic and anarchic politics coexisted. Indeed, if the 'hierarchy under anarchy' argument has to be made, then one can also make an argument on 'anarchy under hierarchy', as is perhaps applicable to the Holy Roman Empire in early modern Europe (Nexon, 2009, p. 82).

If the historical East Asian system was not a complete Chinese hierarchy, will the emerging East Asian order with a rapidly rising China become hierarchic? In premodern East Asia, China's higher civilization was a major foundation of its pre-eminence in the region and an essential basis of the sinocentric order. But this cultural excellence had been lost in the modern era, and the Chinese are now hastily trying to reconstruct a new culture for China's role in the contemporary world. Today China can no longer claim cultural superiority in East Asia (the Koreans, for example, are claiming to be 'truer Confucians'). Although it can look back to the brilliance of its ancient civilization, the PRC for the foreseeable future is unlikely to provide a new civilizational paradigm for others to emulate. Imperial China was able to lay down the rules of the game and prescribe a set of norms and institutions for regional affairs, but the rule-writing ability of contemporary China is inchoate at best. Economically China is regaining its primacy, but hard power alone, as we have seen, is insufficient for creating hierarchy. Despite its prominence in tributary politics, trade by itself was unable to bring about loyal submission; it was more frequently an instrument for gaining profit. More important for China is the ability to generate authority and legitimacy. If cultural influence is a significant factor in international hierarchy, China will have much to improve before approaching its premodern position.

Moreover, the effect of contemporary Chinese foreign policy is also unclear. Scholarly assessments of the dynamics of East Asian politics as the result of China's rise diverge, but no serious scholar has argued that East Asia is now falling under Chinese hegemony. There is no uniform pattern of East Asian response to Chinese power (Shambaugh, 2005; Ross, 2006; Medeiros *et al*, 2008; Chung, 2009/10). Surely, China's apparent assertiveness since 2009 (see Johnston, 2013) has damaged its relations with the United States and most of its neighbors, resulting in the strengthening of American alliance and defense ties in East Asia and a potential balancing coalition against it. In addition to meeting these diplomatic challenges, China needs to overcome considerable odds, especially in terms of developing an attractive political model at home and overcoming the longstanding influence of the United States abroad, to establish authority and hierarchy over other states in the region. A historical perspective helps us to take notice of the important fact that a complete Chinese hierarchy was hard to achieve even when China was in an exceptionally blessed structural position in the past.

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